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Why Not NIMBY?

Simon Feldman and Derek Turner
Connecticut College

A call for clarity and a review of the empirical evidence

Claire Haggett
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This response contributes to Feldman and Turner's interesting discussion in two ways: firstly, it provides some clarity on the definition of the term 'NIMBY'; and secondly it incorporates some of the actual empirical evidence of why people support and oppose renewable energy.

Feldman and Turner's paper is a welcome and valuable addition to the discussions on this topic. Support and opposition to renewable energy developments – particularly wind farms – has received extensive attention from across the social sciences. From the mid-1990's onwards, protests accompanying the development of wind farms attracted increasing interest. This early work tended to problematize opposition and sought ways to explain and overcome it.

Since then – and particularly following the illuminating work of Maarten Wolsink in the Netherlands – academics have moved to more fully explore the reasons for support and protest. Rather than trying to remove opposition, the focus has been on the broader context in which people form their values and behaviours. Rather than decide whether protesters are NIMBYs or not, the focus has moved to how categorisations and accusations of NIMBYism are used in wind energy debates, and the effect of such accusations.

This leads into the first point about the paper. While it is a useful discussion, it lacks clarity about the definition of the NIMBY claims and claimants being considered. Feldman and Turner use the term NIMBY very loosely – at times to mean local people, at other times to include all forms of protest. This is not a merely pedantic point about language use. NIMBY is such a notorious and contested term that it cannot simply be used interchangeably for 'opposition' or 'protest' or any other phrase. Regardless of whether opposing a local development is ethical or not, the term NIMBY is not a neutral descriptor. Indeed, in her seminal and widely cited paper, Burningham (2000) argues that protesters being called 'NIMBYs' is an act for academics to observe, not engage in themselves.

Feldman and Turner may indeed be right that philosophers have paid little attention to "just what it is about NIMBY claims that is supposed to render them ethically problematic" – but they should also be thinking about the label itself before attempting to do so. The term NIMBY can be used to describe selfish, irrational behaviour; any protest about a local development; or any protest, regardless of proximity. Do they mean philosophers should turn their attention to all protest claims, just local claims, or just

those which can somehow be safely classified as ‘NIMBY’? The ethics of a protest will surely depend on which of these is being referenced.

At its most literal, NIMBY is about ‘backyards’, implying very local protest, about consequences of direct and immediate effect for protesters. But Feldman and Turner’s paper seems very hazy on this crucial issue of proximity. There is mention of “genuine NIMBY claims” without explicating what these are. Presumably this is selfish concerns about a local project. But Yosemite is not local for Robert Kennedy; and nobody’s backyard stretches for 26 miles, as per the protests about Cape Cod (surely not even Robert Kennedy’s). The point is that some locations – no matter how near or distant – are simply inappropriate for wind farm development. This is quite different from opposing something just because it happens to be nearby. Similarly, as Feldman and Turner discuss, people protest because of wildlife concerns or to protect something of personal significance, neither of which are irrational and selfish. This encompasses something different than just their “genuine NIMBY claims”, but without acknowledging this. The term NIMBY requires greater clarity in order to determine whether the protest it refers to is justified.

Indeed, Feldman and Turner seem to avoid this issue of definition by assuming that all protest is NIMBY – whether local or selfish or not. But it seems unethical to doubt the motives of people citing arguments such as wilderness preservation, and suspect that they are actually ‘NIMBYs at heart’, merely using these reasons as a ‘cover’. All opposition cannot be so neatly conflated by assuming it is all somehow essentially selfish. Further, this is not a task for philosophers or social scientists to engage in, but to observe how other actors (such as policy makers, planners and developers) do and the effect this has.

The second point is that a wealth of empirical evidence has convincingly argued that the first description of NIMBY – selfish, irrational behaviour by local people unconcerned for the greater good – is actually very rare. Protest certainly does exist, but hardly ever on the basis of selfish reasons alone. Indeed, for a time, many studies were specifically oriented to discovering whether the protest was NIMBY or not – and resoundingly concluded not. There is clear agreement that NIMBY is not an effective way of describing or conceptualizing opposition. Since then, it is usually taken as read that protest isn’t NIMBY: in a journal article an opening paragraph will mention and dismiss the formerly pervasive theory, and then move on to discuss what seems to have motivated opposition in the particular case being studied (see for example Jobert et al, 2007). This is not about being ‘friendly’ or critical about ‘NIMBY’ claims but pointing out that the label itself is opaque, inappropriate, and unhelpful (see Wolsink, 1994; 2006, 2007; Devine-Wright, 2005, 2009; Bell et al, 2005; Van der Horst, 2007; Gray et al, 2005; Haggett, 2008, 2009).

Indeed, in contrast to the NIMBY theory, these studies from around the world have found that opponents tend not to be stupid, selfish or irrational, but very often oppose on the basis of detailed knowledge of their area, the development, and the issue more generally. They frequently protest because of the role of the developer, a profit-oriented outsider with very little knowledge of the community, building a wind farm without any concern

for that community, and no tangible benefit to it. And protest is invariably about the nature of the planning and decision making processes. People (usually correctly) feel that they have no say over decisions that will effect them, no meaningful opportunity to engage, and that any involvement is merely cosmetic after decisions have already been made. Lack of trust in decision making and decision makers is critical. Compellingly, Gross (2007) has shown that if people feel that the processes of reaching a decision about a wind farm are fair, then they are more likely to support that decision, whatever it is.

Further, much protest is about the environmental *impacts* of wind energy. While renewable energy may be good for the planet, there is often local environmental damage to the local landscape, wildlife, and birdlife. Feldman and Turner have an explicit assumption in favour of wind – “we take it as fairly obvious that developing wind energy is good for everyone” – but arguments about environmental damage, inefficiency, huge subsidies, and the minimal contribution towards meeting climate change and carbon emission targets and securing supply are at the heart of many protests. Feldman and Turner state that NIMBY claims are explicitly indifferent to the public good; but opponents of wind farms are very often explicitly oriented to what they see as the public good – avoiding an expensive and inefficient technology that brings immediate and tangible disbenefits to environments and communities. To assume that wind is a good thing, and to judge the claims of those who oppose from this stance is at best unhelpful and at worst unethical in itself. It also means there is a huge gulf between the different rankings in Feldman and Turner’s hypothetical model, and very little empirical evidence to support the transitions between wanting a wind farm elsewhere or not at all.

To conclude, more clarity is needed on the definition and use of the term NIMBY. This matters for three reasons. Firstly, it matters for local people – who would not call themselves NIMBY and do not “cry NIMBY” as Feldman and Turner suggest. Secondly it matters because there is such a difference between ‘NIMBY’ and general and geographically dispersed protest about an issue, and it is not possible to decide whether protest is justifiable without knowing which is being discussed. Thirdly, it matters because the “genuine” NIMBY, in the sense in which I think Feldman and Turner mean it, is very rare anyway. The wealth of empirical evidence has reached the conclusion that selfish, parochial protesters are not the reason why wind farms are opposed. It is reasonable for Feldman and Turner to say that it is beyond their remit to say much “about the problem of how to get people to change their preferences”. From the widespread research on wind farm support and opposition the answer to this is in fact clear – if you want people to change their minds about wind farm development, engage them thoroughly and meaningfully in the planning and decision making processes; and don’t call them a ‘NIMBY’.

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